Candidates for Accreditation in Public Relations: Role Enactment and the Social Media Synapse

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ABSTRACT

Public relations roles have been studied for decades and around the world, but no research published to date examines the role enactment of practitioners who choose to sit for professional certification in public relations. This survey finds that Accreditation-track professionals (N = 150) align with the general-population practitioner in some respects, such as role enactment and gender, but differ in others, such as experience and role enactment. In determining how social media use integrates into the roles literature, the data here support a 3-factor solution, with a social media synapse enactment factor standing alone.

Keywords: roles, public relations, practitioners, UAB, APR, Accreditation, social media, technology

INTRODUCTION

Public relations roles have been studied for decades and around the world, but no research published to date examines the role enactment of practitioners who choose to sit for professional certification in public relations. This study thus sheds light on an important sub-group of practitioners, ones who could be considered more personally vested in the profession, elucidating their enactment of the traditional public relations roles of manager and technician, as well as exploring their use of social media.

Accreditation in Public Relations

In 1964, the Public Relations Society of America started a program to certify practitioners in this field (www.praccreditation.org). In subsequent decades, academics and practitioners alike argued in support of Accreditation as a means to raise the

professional stature of public relations (Brody, 1984, 1992; Broom & Sha, 2013; Hainsworth, 1993; Jackson, 1988; Lesly, 1981; McKee, Nayman, et al., 1975; Report and Recommendations, 1981). Today, the Accreditation in Public Relations (APR) program is overseen by the Universal Accreditation Board (UAB), which is composed of the Agricultural Relations Council, the Florida Public Relations Association, the Maine Public Relations Council, the National School Public Relations Association, the Public Relations Society of America, the Religion Communicators Council, the Southern Public Relations Federation, and Asociación de Relacionistas Profesionales de Puerto Rico (Puerto Rico Public Relations Association) (www.praccreditation.org).

Just as oversight of the Accreditation program has evolved from the Public Relations Society of America to the broader-based UAB, the format of the Accreditation process has changed with the times. Today, candidates for Accreditation must submit an application, 16 essays regarding their work experience, and a portfolio of work samples. The latter two items are discussed in a panel interview with Accredited practitioners (called the Readiness Review), who determine whether a candidate is ready to sit for the computer-based Examination, a multiple-choice test administered at a professional testing site (www.praccreditation.org).

In 2012, the pass rate was 71.4%, with 167 of 234 candidates earning their APRs that year. In both 2011 and 2012, about 19% of members in the Public Relations Society of America were Accredited (Mulvihill, personal communication, 2013). The relatively small proportion of Accredited practitioners is not necessarily problematic in and of itself. However, what is problematic are findings from prior research indicating that Accredited practitioners differ in significant ways from their non-Accredited peers (see Employment Profile, 2000; Hazleton, Rayburn, & Lynch, 2007; Professional Accreditation, 2006; Wright, 1981).

Most recently, Sha (2011b) found that Accredited and non-Accredited practitioners differed significantly in terms of gender, age, years of experience, education levels, employing organization type, reporting relationships, professional competencies, and salary levels. In a nutshell, Accredited practitioners were male, older, more experienced, and more highly educated; they earned higher salaries, reported to higher levels of management, and engaged more frequently in the public relations four-step strategic planning process, as well as in ethics and legal issues. Furthermore, "APRs [were] over-represented among the ranks of independent practitioners and public relations agency workers, and . . . under-represented in nonprofits and professional service organizations" (Sha, 2011b, p. 125).

These significant differences between Accredited and non-Accredited public relations practitioners would seem to justify the purpose of this present study – to examine role enactment and social media use in candidates for Accreditation in Public Relations. By focusing on those who choose to seek Accreditation, this study will help illuminate one path to leadership in public relations practice. Though the data here won't specifically answer if Accreditation creates leaders, it continues a line of scholarship working backward to help pinpoint the time and place within one's career that an Accredited

professional begins to develop into the leader described by Sha (2011b).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship regarding public relations roles and the use of social media by public relations practitioners is reviewed here to inform the current study.

Public Relations Roles

According to Broom and Sha (2013), roles research in public relations began in the 1970s, when Broom and Smith (1979) published a typology of four roles played by practitioners on the job: communication technician, expert prescriber, problem-solving-process facilitator, and communication facilitator. In subsequent research, these four roles were collapsed statistically into two: managers and technicians (Dozier & Broom, 1995). Over the years, scholarship on public relations has sought to determine why some practitioners enact the manager role, while others enact the technician role (e.g., Acharya, 1985; Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig, 1995; Moss, Warnaby, & Newman, 2000; Panigyrakis, 2001; Sha & Dozier, 2011; White & Dozier, 1992; Toth & Cline, 1989).

Although this deeper question of "why" remains largely unanswered, researchers have successfully identified some specific factors related to role enactment. For example (and not surprisingly), manager role enactment has been significantly and positively correlated with age (Broom, 1982; Dozier & Broom, 1995). Likewise, manager role enactment has consistently and positively been related to the practitioner's use of research for public relations purposes (Broom & Dozier, 1986; Dozier, 1981, 1984, 1986; Judd, 1987; Moss, Newman, & DeSanto, 2005).

With similar consistency over the decades, manager role enactment has largely been the province of male practitioners, whereas female practitioners have tended to enact the technician role (e.g., Aldoory & Toth, 2002; Broom, 1982; Broom & Dozier, 1986; Cline et al., 1986; Grunig, Toth, & Hon, 2001; Moss, Warnaby, & Newman, 2000; Toth & Cline, 1989; Toth & Serini, 1998; Wootton, 1997). On the other hand, Sha and Dozier (2011) reported that men and women in 2010 were enacting the manager role with equal frequency, suggesting that perhaps male dominance in the manager role is waning, although women continued to enact the technician role at higher rates than did men.

Despite the plethora of scholarship on public relations roles, no studies published to date have examined role enactment specific to Accredited practitioners. In fact, no studies on public relations roles have appeared to even consider Accreditation status as a factor that might affect role enactment (Dozier, personal communication, 2013). Thus, this paper proposes the following hypotheses:

> **H1: Men enact the manager role at higher rates than do women.**

> **H2: Managers are older and more experienced than are technicians.**
>
> **H3: Manager role enactment is positively correlated with passing the computer-based Examination for Accreditation in Public Relations.**

Social Media Use

Recent years have seen an explosion of scholarship on social media use in public relations, particularly by nonprofits (e.g., Briones et al., 2011; Curtis et al., 2010; Henderson & Bowley, 2010; Waters et al., 2009), in crisis situations (e.g., Muralidharan et al., 2011; Schultz et al., 2011; Tirkkonen & Luoma-aho, 2011), and in media relations (e.g., Avery et al., 2010; Waters et al., 2010).

Scholars have connected social media use to various theoretical concepts, including leadership (Sweetser & Kelleher, 2011), anticipatory socialization (Taylor & Kent, 2010), framing theory (Muralidharan et al., 2011), image repair theory (Moody, 2011), public relations models (Waters & Williams, 2011), diffusion of innovations theory (Avery et al., 2010), and public relations roles (Diga & Kelleher, 2009).

Of particular relevance to the present research are studies that co-orient social media usage and leadership (a characteristic of managers). In their study on thought leadership in public relations via Twitter, Sweetser and Kelleher (2011) identified their sample of randomly selected survey respondents as those who were following (on Twitter) UAB-affiliated organizations because it served as an indicator of professionalism in practice and ethic. Moving to roles studies, Diga and Kelleher (2009) found that managers and technicians demonstrated no significant differences with respect to their use of social media. The results of the Diga and Kelleher (2009) small-sample study ($\underline{N}$=40) on social media, however, contradicted prior research on new media technologies in general (e.g., Anderson & Reagan, 1992; Kelleher, 2001; Porter & Sallot, 2003), which had found significant differences between managers and technicians in the types of media technologies used. In a recent qualitative study, Lee et al. (2013) found that social media tasks were often assigned to junior-level practitioners who typically engaged in technician-type activities.

Related to the question of social media use and public relations practitioner roles is the fundamental issue of whether social media usage constitutes a marker of role enactment or whether it is merely another job skill or work category. In a factor analysis of 10 KSAs (knowledge, skills, and abilities), Sha (2011a) found that "use of information technology and new media channels" loaded with "crisis communication management" onto a factor dominated by "media relations" (p. 193). In the same study, Sha (2011a) also found that, in a factor analysis of 12 public relations work categories, "media relations" and "social media relations" loaded together onto a single factor (p. 195). Sha

used these results to argue that "social media relations are merely a variation on activities associated with traditional media relations" (p. 195), rather than a "new" type of public relations practice.

A year later, Sha and Dozier (2012) made a similar argument, based on results of their survey of 4,881 PRSA members:

Although certain uses of social media are consequences of practitioner role enactment, measures of social media use should not be mistaken as direct measures of role enactment. Frequency of social media usage is not a measure of manager or technician role enactment. Rather, role enactment as an independent variable is linked conceptually to specific utilizations of social media as dependent variables. (p. 16)

In other words, these authors argued against incorporating social media tasks into the extant measures of manager and technician roles. Nevertheless, the present study poses this research question:

> **RQ: Does the social media function of public relations represent a role or a work category?**

METHOD

With assistance from the Universal Accreditation Board, this study deployed an online, confidential survey to APR candidates after they had taken the computer-based Examination for Accreditation in Public Relations. Using a modified and abbreviated version of Broom's original 24-item roles scale (see Broom, 1982, 1986; Broom & Dozier, 1985, 1986, 1990; Broom & Smith, 1978, 1979), this study employed a 10-item version that has been found to be consistent with studies using the full battery (see Dozier, 1983, 1984, 1989, 1990; 1992; Dozier & Broom, 1995, 2006; Dozier & Gottesman, 1982; Dozier, L. A. Grunig, & J. E. Grunig, 1995). This abbreviated roles instrument contains five items representing public relations managers and five items representing public relations technicians. Two additional items regarding social media tasks developed by Sha and Dozier (2012) were added. These social media items were described by Sha and Dozier (2012) as being theoretically driven; one reflected manager-role characteristics, and one those of the technician role. Respondents were asked how often they enacted each of the 12 roles activities, ranging from never (1) to always (7).

The survey was completed by public relations professionals who had undergone the Accreditation process (i.e., advanced from the Readiness Review and sat for the computer-based Examination) in 2012. Survey data were collected throughout the year, and an invitation was sent to each prospective Accreditation candidate (regardless of Examination outcome) after he or she had sat for the computer-based Examination.

RESULTS

The majority of the respondents ($N = 150$) were female ($n = 121$; 80.7%), with less than a quarter being male ($n = 24$; 16%). The self-reported racioethnicity of the respondents was predominately white/Caucasian ($n = 118$; 78.7%), followed by black/African American ($n = 19$; 12.7%), Hispanic/Latino ($n = 9$; 6.0%), Asian/Asian-American/Pacific Islander ($n = 4$; 2.7%), and Native American/American Indian ($n = 1$; 0.7%). In keeping with current U.S. government practice, respondents were allowed to choose as many racioethnic categories as they felt described them.

Role vs. Work Enactment for Social Media

The research question in this study asked whether social media was a work task or a role; the answer is that, for now, social media use reflects a unique practitioner role that is distinct from both the previously identified manager and technician.

In answering the research question, a series of factor analyses was conducted in a similar fashion to Sha and Dozier (2012), employing a multi-level factor analysis approach. First, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted on all 12 roles items using principal components analysis and varimax rotation with Kaiser Normalization. This factor analysis resulted in a three-factor solution explaining 61.61% of the variance. The first factor is best described as manager (Cronbach's inter-item correlation coefficient = .82), the second as technician (Cronbach's inter-item correlation coefficient = .74), and the third factor as social media (Cronbach's inter-item correlation coefficient = .72). The manager factor had five items in it, such as keeping management informed of public reactions and working with managers to increase skills in solving public relations problems. The technician factor had four items in it, such as handling technical aspects of producing public relations materials and producing brochures, pamphlets, etc.

The third factor contained three items: using social media to disseminate messages, using social media to learn what is happening outside the organization, and maintaining media contacts/placing press releases; this latter item traditionally loaded onto the technician factor. In this factor solution, the third factor is very clearly enacting social media as a distinct role. In naming the third factor for social media enactment, this role appears to be something of a synapse for social media within the organization. A synapse is a path through which specialized signals flow, and in the case of the social media synapse the public relations practitioner is connecting the organization to the communication environment via social media in a way that others in the organization either cannot or are not. The standardized factor scores were used in this analysis when examining roles. One item double loaded and was thus considered for both factors it loaded on. See Table 1 for factor composition and loading scores.

A second factor analysis on the roles items was conducted forcing a two-factor solution, in the same manner as explored by Sha and Dozier (2012). This secondary factor

analysis was done to determine if the two social media items would load onto their appropriate conceptual factors (see Sha & Dozier, 2012). As such, a principal components analysis was used to extract or "force" two initial factors (Varimax solution). In this case, the social media item that described strategic functions (using social media to learn what is happening outside the organization that might affect the organization) indeed loaded as the last variable in the manager factor. Similarly, the more technical social media item (using social media to disseminate messages) loaded as the last item in the technician factor. Table 2 shows the factor loading scores for the forced two-factor solution.

Table 1. *Exploratory Factor Analysis of Public Relations Roles*

Practitioner Roles and Social Media Measures	Manager Factor	Technician Factor	Social Media Synapse Factor
I keep management informed of public reactions to organizational policies, procedures and/or actions	.83		
I encourage management participation when making important public relations decisions	.80		
When working with managers on public relations, I outline alternative approaches for solving problems	.75		
I observe that others in the organization hold me accountable for the success or failure of public relations programs	.68		
I work with managers to increase their skills in solving and/or avoiding public relations problems	.66		
I handle the technical aspects of producing public relations materials		.76	
I produce brochures, pamphlets and other publications		.77	
I do photography and graphics for public relations materials		.76	
I am the person who writes public relations materials presenting information on issues important to the organization		.53	
I use social media to disseminate messages to organizational audiences			.85
I use social media to learn what's happening outside my organization that might affect my organization			.76
I maintain media contacts and place press releases		.39	.51

Table 2. *Rotated Component Matrix (Forced Two-Factor Solution) of Public Relations Roles for Manager and Technician*

Practitioner Role and Social Media Measures	Manager Factor	Technician Factor
I keep management informed of public reactions to organizational policies, procedures and/or actions	.84	
I encourage management participation when making important public relations decisions	.76	
I work with managers to increase their skills in solving and/or avoiding public relations problems	.76	
I observe that others in the organization hold me accountable for the success or failure of public relations programs	.70	
When working with managers on public relations, I outline alternative approaches for solving problems	.64	
I use social media to learn what's happening outside My organization	.48	
I handle the technical aspects of producing public relations materials		.79
I do photography and graphics for public relations materials		.77
I am the person who writes public relations materials presenting information on issues important to the organization		.66
I produce brochures, pamphlets and other publications		.64
I maintain media contacts and place press releases	.36	.56
I use social media to disseminate messages	.35	.43

Note: Frequency of role activity was measured from never [1] to always [7]. Factor 1 explained 35.56% of the variance (Cronbach's alpha = .80) and factor 2 explained 15.63% of the variance (Cronbach's alpha =.76).

These results demonstrate notable progress from Sha and Dozier (2012), whose forced two-factor solution resulted in both social media items loading onto the manager factor. However, in this study, only 51.19% of the variance was explained with this forced two-factor solution. The well-accepted threshold for total variance explained is expected to be 60% or better (Child, 2006; Netemeyer, Bearden, & Sharma, 2003; Sweetser, 2010). As such, while conceptually the forced two-factor solution may be more favorable, it was not statistically feasible in adequately explaining roles in public relations. In short, social media is currently a unique role in public relations practice, described here as social media synapses. The forced two-factor solution was not used in subsequent analysis in this study.

In addressing the hypotheses presented above, this study employed the standardized factor scores from the initial and naturally occurring three-factor solution, which indicated three unique roles: manager, technician, and social media synapse.

Gender Differences in Role Enactment

The first hypothesis posited that men would enact the manager role at higher rates than would women. A series of independent samples t-tests was run on each of the standardized factor scores examining the differences between roles based on respondents' self-reported gender. Only the traditional factors of manager and technician resulted in statically significant differences. Males reported higher levels of manager enactment (standardized mean factor score = .119) in their daily work than did females (standardized factor mean score = -.023), t (143) = 5.16, $p \leq$ .05. Conversely, females reported higher levels of technician enactment (standardized factor mean score = .023) daily than did males (standardized factor mean score = -.119), t (143) = 4.45, $p \leq$ .05. No gender differences were found for the social media synapse enactment role. H1 was partially supported.

Age, Tenure, and Experience

The second hypothesis posited that managers would be older and more experienced compared to technicians. A series of Pearson correlation tests were run on the standardized role factor scores and ratio-level variables such as age (in years) and tenure (in years) working in the public relations industry. As one might expect, there was a moderate, positive correlation between age and tenure (r = .66, $p \leq$ .001). There was an extremely weak, negative correlation between age and the social media synapse role (r = -.177, $p \leq$ .05), indicating that perhaps younger practitioners participated in more social media enactment. This finding aligns with results reported by Lee et al. (2013). H2 was not supported.

Since many practitioners come to public relations from other career fields (see Broom & Sha, 2013), an independent samples t-test investigated possible relationships between role enactment and whether the practitioner had begun his or her career in the industry or transferred from another career. Results showed no statistically significant differences for any of the standardized factor scores based on whether one had transferred from another career.

Passing the Computer-based Examination

The third hypothesis posited that manager role enactment would be positively correlated with passing the computer-based Examination for Accreditation in Public Relations. First, an independent samples t-test examined whether there was a difference in the manager factor score based on whether the practitioner had passed or failed the Examination, $t(143) = .209$, $p = .68$. This result showed that there was not a statistically significant difference in manager enactment based on Examination result. Next, a Pearson's correlation test examined whether there was a relationship between the two variables (e.g., as manager enactment rose would likelihood of passing do so as well?). In conducting the correlation test, the standardized factor score represented manager enactment and the practitioner's Examination result was recoded into a dummy variable to denote passing (1=pass, 0=did not pass, unsure if passed, refused to answer). This variable was created from the respondent's self-reported Examination result, which would have been made known to the candidate by the UAB after the Examination had been taken and before this study's survey invitation had been distributed. The resulting correlation was not significant. Based on the tests conducted, H3 was not supported.

4.5 Post-Hoc Analysis: Employer Type

ANOVA tests were run on each of the standardized factor scores against the practitioner's employer type. The options for employer type presented to respondents were: nonprofit/association ($n = 66$; 18.6%), government/military ($n = 64$; 18%), corporation ($n = 63$; 17.7%), educational institution ($n = 63$), public relations firm/agency? ($n = 53$; 14.9%), independent practitioner ($n = 9$; 2.5%), and professional services ($n = 6$; 1.7%). A small percentage of the respondents either selected "other" ($n = 19$; 5.4%) or didn't respond to the question ($n = 12$; 3.4%).

Main effects were observed only in the manager factor, $F(130, 5) = 11.48$, $p \leq .025$. A Bonferroni post-hoc test revealed that practitioners employed by an agency/firm/consultancy reported higher levels of manager role enactment than did those employed by educational institutions (standardized factor mean score difference = .79, $p \leq .05$). There were no other statistically significant results based on employer type.

DISCUSSION

Though previous research suggested that social media was a task that was undertaken as a part of the manager and technician roles, the data here show that in the current state of the public relations industry this is not the case. Instead, data here suggest that social media enactment is its own role, i.e., a social media synapse, described here as a connector for the organization to a specialized world of social media. The case being made for social media standing alone, though, will not be without controversy, or perhaps better put, evolution. Just as public relations roles have been investigated in relation to other communication technologies like the Web and blogs (see Porter et al., 2003; Porter et al., 2009), there appears to be an evolution as the technology is tried out and settles into the practice. Perhaps within five years, as social media becomes a more common component integrated into a public relations plan, the need for the "specialization" feature of social media will decrease and the synapse will dissipate.

For now, we see that the natural 3-factor solution is where the practice lies with regard to social media, but in the years to come it is likely that the 2-factor solution that was not yet powerful enough may one day be so. The early indications here are that when these social media task items settle into the traditional 2-factor solution, they will fall well into the areas where conceptually they make sense. That is, the social media dissemination item will load onto the technician factor, and the strategic social media item will load onto the manager factor. As such, though the current findings do certainly tell the story of today, academics and practitioners would be wise to continue this line of research to track the development of the social media construct in the framework of public relations roles.

As the sample in this study was restricted to those pursuing Accreditation, it presents an interesting lens through which to interpret the results. Certainly, the results stand alone as a contribution to public relations research, but perhaps the bigger contribution is how these results of Accreditation candidates compare to the general practice itself. Recall that those who are Accredited make up only about 1 in 5 of the membership of the largest professional society in public relations. Presumably, PRSA members in general are dedicated to their industry and have a high involvement factor in driving their career from technician to manager. That said, those who pursue Accreditation, if Sweetser and Kelleher's (2011) assessment of the UAB is presumed correct, are even more so invested as practitioners as trying to set themselves apart as ethical and excellent in their practice. In further discussing the implications of the findings here, it is perhaps best to compare the results of these Accreditation candidates not to themselves but to compare these data with previous studies on the general-practitioner population, in order to understand the differences, if any.

For example, with regard to gender and role enactment, the Accreditation-track population appears to reflect previous findings from the general population of practitioners. Here, men were more likely to enact the manager role, and women were more likely to enact the technician role. In contrast, with respect to age and role

enactment, the Accreditation candidates contradicted previous findings from general-population practitioners. Specifically, there was a negative (though weak) correlation between age and social media synapse role enactment. Certainly, younger practitioners often work with social media, but this finding suggests that social media is more of a task than a strategic approach. If, as expected, the social media synapse enactment and age had been correlated, that would have been a signal that social media was being integrated at the strategic level into campaigns where it was not just another tool through which to communicate but perhaps a larger-picture strategy. However, given the findings here actually report that negative relationship, it can be suggested that social media among these practitioners may still be more of a tactical action deployed in campaigns. Certainly more research must be done in this area and should specifically investigate the tasks for which social media are used (e.g., reviving the Porter et al., 2003 approach as done with the World Wide Web).

This placement of social media into one's work is also suggestive of where one is in one's career. True managers would be older due to the experience required to gain power within an organization and therefore indeed be more strategic with their integration of social media. True technicians on the other hand would be more aligned to the data indications among this sample of Accreditation candidates – young, tactics focused, etc. Such lines up the next logical question which would ask at what point in one's career does one move from the general practitioner population to an Accreditation-seeking practitioner? H3 sought to illuminate that timeline as it suggested that managers would be those likely to participate in the Accreditation process, but this was not supported. Even more so, though not significant, all of the factors negatively correlated with passing the Examination. This suggests that while Accreditation in Public Relations may be seen as a leadership indicator (Sweetser & Kelleher, 2011), those who sit for the credentialing exam perhaps use Accreditation as a ladder to management. The data here do not directly investigate that, but they do support the need for additional research to laser-target that practitioner career path to chart the transition from technician to manager and what role the Accreditation process may have in it.

Continuing in that vein as to what makes a manager, the data here show that those in agencies are more likely to enact the manager role than are those practicing public relations in educational institutions. Considering the size of public relations firms juxtaposed to the small staff in many education public relations settings (see Kelleher & Sweetser, 2012), this finding suggests that larger staffs indeed offer more upward mobility, specialization, and management options for practitioners.

Moving forward and considering the deviations noted here that exist between the Accreditation sample and the general-practitioner population as reported in previous studies, it becomes obvious that research into public relations roles should continue. Already a heuristic and well-documented construct, public relations roles may continue to evolve as new tools are introduced to the practice. Furthermore, the comparison of Accreditation-track professionals to the general population of practitioners offers interesting and significant differences such that research should continue in this area.

CONCLUSION

This study found that, for now and among Accreditation candidates, social media use denotes a practitioner role separate from the classic manager and technician dichotomy, although specific social media tasks do align well with traditional tasks used to determine manager and technician role enactment. Reflective of prior roles studies, the manager role among Accreditation candidates was more likely to be enacted by men, while the technician role was more likely to be enacted by women; no gender differences were found for social media synapse role enactment. Though age was expected to correlate with manager enactment, this was not the case. There was no difference in role enactment between candidates who passed the Accreditation examination and those who did not, suggesting that the pursuit of Accreditation in and of itself may denote manager role enactment and leadership development.

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